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ABORIGINAL PROFESSIONALS: WORK, CLASS AND CULTURE

J. LAHN

Centre for
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Professor Matthew Gray
Director, CAEPR
Research School of Social Sciences
College of Arts & Social Sciences
The Australian National University
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J. Lahn

Julie Lahn is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Research School of Social Science, College of Arts and Social Science, The Australian National University.

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Abstract

This paper considers the increasing representation of Indigenous people in professional occupations. While the predominant focus in Australian scholarship remains contexts of Aboriginal disadvantage, there is a steadily increasing number of Indigenous professionals in Australia among whom many reside in urban locales. In 2006, Indigenous professionals totalled more than 14,000 people, equivalent to 13 per cent of the Indigenous workforce in Australia. Despite being largely overlooked, Aboriginal people themselves are aware of this trend with some debating its relation to emerging ideas of a new Aboriginal 'middle class'. This paper begins by summarising data concerning Aboriginal professionals: their fields of work, education levels and location. It then considers Aboriginal discussion of the term 'middle class', reflecting on attitudes to this expression as a mode of self-description and/or ascription, and its implications within narratives of Aboriginal culture and identity. The paper suggests that greater research engagement with Aboriginal professionals is needed to enlarge understandings of occupational aspirations and social mobility as envisaged among Aboriginal people, in addition to contributing a more complete picture of Aboriginal engagements with work and a clearer appreciation of the diverse shapes of contemporary Aboriginal lives.

Keywords: Urban Indigeneity, professional work, class, social mobility, culture, Indigenous employment

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Background

This paper seeks to draw attention to an understudied feature of contemporary Australian society: the increasing involvement of Aboriginal people in the professions. These individuals total more than 14,000, equivalent to 13 per cent of the Australian Indigenous workforce. In order to generate useful public policy insights in relation to Aboriginal social mobility and its place in the lives of Indigenous people, their families and communities, it is important to listen to and learn from the full range of Indigenous experiences of work. The absence of attention to Aboriginal professionals as a group within Australian sociology and anthropology points to a major shortcoming in scholarly representations of Aboriginal participation in contemporary spheres of work and a neglect of processes of transformation which are increasingly evident to Aboriginal people themselves. This paper summarises current data concerning Aboriginal professionals: their fields of work, education levels and incomes, in addition to considering the category of 'professionals' itself, its relevance and limitations in Indigenous contexts.

Aboriginal people in rural and remote areas have long formed the main focus of social science research in Australia. A minor literature concerning Indigenous social life in urban settings has persisted over several decades (e.g. Keen 1988; Langton 1981; Reay 1964; Rowley 1970), and in recent years has expanded (e.g. Cowlshaw 2009; Morgan 2006; Paradies 2006; Rowse 2000; Yamanoguchi 2010). But Aboriginal professionals in urban centres remain largely overlooked in such research (notable exceptions are Foley 2008; Ganter 2010; and the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (Behrendt et al. 2012)). This is in marked contrast with the international situation, where a burgeoning literature involving Indigenous minorities in urban locales can be found that includes a growing focus on Indigenous professionals and entrepreneurs (e.g. Cote 2012; Newhouse & Peters 2003, 2011; Todd 2001, 2012). Canadian studies in particular have been addressing this phenomenon, often linked to what is termed a 'new' or 'emerging' Aboriginal middle class. The idea is underpinned by the socioeconomic diversification of urban Aboriginal populations in Canada, with increasing numbers of educated Aboriginal people working in professional and managerial occupations (e.g. Peters 2010; Ponting 2005; Wotherspoon 2003).

Clearly, any assertion concerning the emergence of a middle class in a population whose historical and contemporary experience involves disadvantage, marginalisation and discrimination will be a matter of complexity and inevitably also contestation. Nevertheless, parallel discussions are evident in other locales such as New Zealand (e.g. Rata

2011; van Meijl 2011) and, in a broader sense, African Americans in the United States (Martin 2010). Frequently at issue is the question of whether the term is appropriate as a form of ascription rather than self-identification, as well as the local salience of the label itself in analytical terms. Such debates are ongoing in relation to indigenous populations in locations as diverse as Tonga (Besnier 2009; James 2003), Papua New Guinea (Gewertz & Errington 1999) and the Cook Islands (Sissons 1998).

Interestingly, in an Australian context the issue of an urban-dwelling 'new Aboriginal middle class' is beginning to be raised primarily outside the academy among Aboriginal people themselves (e.g. Behrendt in Upton 2011; Holt 2011; Pearson 2007). These discussions involve a range of concerns including once again the question of what might entail being middle class, its links to social mobility, and most especially, the implications of such a category for identity. Importantly, what is denoted by the expression 'middle class' in its use by Aboriginal people remains an open question. The extent to which the phrase represents a unified or diverse set of ideas is similarly unclear. Both issues need to be addressed through research, in which engagement with Aboriginal professionals themselves will form a critical element.

Notwithstanding the lack of substantive research on such topics to date in Australia, understanding the uses and implications of the term 'middle class' for Indigenous people could provide significant insights into the character of Aboriginal social mobility. Focusing on the term's perceived meaning, desirability, relationship to the professions, to material and non-material aspirations (e.g. home ownership and education) and its linkage to broader aspects of Indigenous social and working lives could also contribute to a more complete picture of the complexity and diversity of contemporary Indigenous life. To that end, the paper reflects briefly on some recent public discussion of the idea of an Aboriginal middle class by Indigenous Australians. It is notable that all the individuals involved could be described as professionals. However, it remains uncertain that Aboriginal understandings of being middle class will necessarily map neatly onto the category of professionals.

An analytical approach that foregrounds Aboriginal narratives and perspectives might usefully draw on aspects of the 'cultural turn' in the sociological literature which has re-introduced the importance of agency and identity into discussions of employment and class previously dominated by economic approaches (e.g. Lawler 2005; Savage 2000). This has involved a general shift in focus from 'employment' to broader notions of 'work' and work culture, incorporating

TABLE 1. Employment in professional occupations among 20–64 year olds, Australia, 1996–2006

Census year	Indigenous %		Non-Indigenous	
	%	No.	%	No.
1996	10.38	8,033	17.61	1,266,944
2006	13.04	14,002	21.66	1,674,692
Change (%)		74.3		32.2

Source: Taylor et al. 2012.

renewed inquiry into the relation of forms of social mobility to lived experiences of moral discourse and social practices of identity (e.g. Halford & Strangleman 2009; Hebson 2009; Parry et al. 2005; Skeggs 1997; Wilkinson 2009). Anthropological discussions are also of relevance in positioning ‘middle classness’ as ‘a culturally specific position and set of subjectivities, articulated in and through shifting terrains of gender, nation, race, caste, ethnicity, and empire’ (Heiman, Liechty & Freeman 2012: 7). This kind of approach places the diverse socio-cultural dimensions involved in terms like ‘middle class’ at the forefront of analytical thinking.

Note that my purpose here is not to advocate for ‘middle class’ as an appropriate descriptive label for any specific segment of the Indigenous population in Australia (or for that matter, any individual). And I certainly do not urge the elevation of class over other concepts of social division, stratification or structured inequality and exclusion. But I do suggest that those concerned with issues of Aboriginal social mobility, Indigenous relationships with work and work culture—including work and family—and life-course aspirations should be attentive not only to increasing Aboriginal involvement in professional occupations but also to the character of narratives of ‘middle classness’ as they are occurring among Indigenous people.

Aboriginal professionals— How many and where?

The number of Indigenous professionals is growing. The 2006 national census data (2006, Australian Bureau of Statistics) indicates that just over 14,000 Indigenous adults were working in professional occupations.¹ Ten years earlier, that figure was 8,000, representing a numerical increase of some 74 per cent (Taylor et al. 2012: 12). The increase in non-Indigenous professionals over the same period was just 32 per cent (Taylor et al. 2012). Over this decade, the total increase in the Indigenous population was 29 per cent. In 1996 around 10 per cent of

the Indigenous workforce were employed in professional occupations. In 2006, this increased to 13 per cent (see Table 1). Taken together, these figures point to a significant change in the composition of the Indigenous workforce in Australia—the increasing representation of Indigenous people in professional occupations.

The most common forms of professional work for Indigenous people in 2006 were in the areas of education, health, visual arts, environmental science and human resources, particularly in occupations such as registered nurses, school teachers, rangers and artists. Recent increases have been greatest among health professions with the most rapid growth occurring in physiotherapy and psychology (Anderson 2011). Around 40 per cent of Indigenous professionals held university degree level qualifications or higher, compared with 70 per cent of non-Indigenous professionals.

It should be noted that a number of practical and conceptual issues surround the categorising of professional occupations. A considerable sociological literature, dating back to Weber, has engaged notions of ‘profession’ and ‘professional’ and revealed these to be deeply contested categories, while analytical approaches are fragmented across a diverse range of topics and theoretical concerns (e.g. Evetts 2006; Sciulli 2005; Torstendahl 2005).

Between the 1996 and 2006 Census the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) itself moved from relying on the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (second edition) to the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) (first edition). Both use essentially the same classification criteria (ABS 2006), though the shift did introduce changes to the way some occupations were organised (notably Clerical, Information and Communication Technology and Apprenticeships). This would not have had a significant impact on the data concerning Indigenous Professionals. ANZSCO (ABS 2009) defines the scope of professional work as follows:

1. An analysis of Indigenous professionals in 2011 Census statistics is in preparation and will appear in CAEPR’s 2011 Census Papers series.

TABLE 2. Employment in professional occupations by location among 20–64 year olds, Australia, 2006

Location	Indigenous %		Non-Indigenous	
	%	No.	%	No.
Major cities	44.25	5,886	78.32	1,353,504
All other locations	55.75	7,415	22.11	382,121

Notes: Inadequately described and not stated occupation data are excluded. Migratory and no usual address data are also excluded. Major cities are Perth, Brisbane, Adelaide, Melbourne, Brisbane, Sydney and Canberra.

Source: 2006 ABS Census of Population and Housing.

PROFESSIONALS perform analytical, conceptual and creative tasks through the application of theoretical knowledge and experience in the fields of the arts, media, business, design, engineering, the physical and life sciences, transport, education, health, information and communication technology, the law, social sciences and social welfare.

The greatest concentration of professional occupations exists in urban settings, and it is important to observe that the number of urban-dwelling Indigenous people as a proportion of the Indigenous population as a whole has also grown markedly over several decades: from 44 per cent in the 1970s to 76 per cent in 2006 (Taylor 2011: 290).² In 2006, three-quarters of non-Indigenous professionals and almost half the Indigenous professionals resided in Australia's state capital cities (see Table 2). It seems likely that the lion's share of increases in Indigenous professionals has also occurred in these localities.

Aboriginal people and work

Currently the substantial literature that exists concerning work and Indigenous people focuses on those employed in non-professional occupations or who are unemployed, which together represents the majority of the adult Indigenous population. This material often highlights areas of tension between Indigenous social values and mainstream 'work culture' (e.g. Austin-Broos 2003; Burbank 2006; McRae-Williams & Gerritsen 2010). This literature signals a tendency for Indigenous people to show greater interest and confidence in those forms of work and study which align most closely with the experience, values and aspirations specific to their family and community (e.g. Alford & James 2007; Lahn 2012; Minniecon & Kong 2005). This should not be surprising. In a wide range of research Indigenous people have consistently emphasised relationships with family as the most important and distinguishing feature of their lives and as a core element of Aboriginal identity.

A particularly widespread idiom refers to the imperative of having a family to belong to, evidenced in the movement of money, goods and services in order to sustain and reproduce relationships within extended family networks. This characterisation has been identified across a range of locations—remote, rural and urban (e.g. MacDonald 2000; Peterson 1993; Schwab 1995). The obligations to extended kin and at times, to broader forms of Aboriginal community, directly impact on the involvement of Indigenous persons in work including the types of work sought, the financial resources at their disposal, and the way in which these resources are directed (Gibson 2010). Family obligations, values and experiences provide a reason to work, a rationale for choosing particular kinds of work and a reason for work absences and leaving work entirely (Other-Gee 1999). Familial networks also frequently operate as job networks, playing a critical part in accessing the most desirable forms of employment, those jobs that offer greater potential for shared social and cultural values, such as jobs in an Indigenous organisation, and/or with an Aboriginal boss or manager (Lahn 2012).

As yet, little is known of the ways in which factors of this sort impact on the growing Indigenous involvement in the professions. Indigenous experiences of professional work remain under-researched, as does the role played by individual and familial aspirations. One study of Indigenous medical graduates cited strong support from their immediate family, combined with a desire to meet the needs of their community and Indigenous people generally, as key reasons for both choosing and succeeding in their studies in this professional field (Minniecon & Kong 2005). There is a clear need to explore these kinds of insights in much greater qualitative detail. The issue of potential tension between professional cultures and Indigenous values, of Indigenous people's strategies for addressing these and Indigenous conceptions of work-life balance are under-studied and under-theorised. Significant policy implications may follow as many professional organisations (e.g. Australian Public Service Commission (n.d.)) encourage flexible workplace practices to accommodate a

2. This figure refers to people living in localities of 1,000 or more residents.

range of cultural differences including specific obligations associated with extended Indigenous familial networks. Research considering the experience of such arrangements among Aboriginal people is crucial both to understanding current levels of Indigenous involvement in the professions and the issue of effective strategies for increasing this.

Indigenous perspectives of 'middle classness'

At last year's Melbourne Writers Festival, Marcia Langton stated unequivocally: 'there is a growing Aboriginal middle class' (Langton 2012). The basis for this conclusion was recently laid out in her Boyer Lectures, where she explicitly cited the 'educational and employment achievements, home ownership and other factors that contribute to increasing income, wellbeing and capacity to participate in the Australian society and economy' (Langton 2013: 153). Other Aboriginal people have also clearly linked this middle class notion to professional employment, relatively high incomes and higher educational qualifications. Yin Paradies, for example, refers to the existence of a 'growing Indigenous middle class as demonstrated by the fact that between 1994 and 2002 the proportion of Indigenous people with at least a Bachelor's degree increased threefold (from 1% to 3%)', and also refers to the Indigenous middle class as 'educated and well-remunerated'. Another prominent aspect relates to education and training, and particularly higher education (Maddison 2009: 115; Paradies 2006: 358). Similarly, Larissa Behrendt overtly associates a notion of middle class with professional careers, particularly 'influential professions'. Behrendt (quoted in Maddison 2009: 116) also points to the 'huge challenge to Indigenous politics and identity' posed by the recent emergence of what she terms a 'middle class black Australia':

First of all the emerging middle class completely breaks the stereotype that is dominant within—and is actually quite a dominant reality within—the Aboriginal community, of people who are socioeconomically disadvantaged... There's a real challenge in seeing people who are middle class, who have successful careers in professions that are quite influential in mainstream society, whether they're doctors or lawyers or accountants or business analysts, and then having to figure out, well, what does self-determination mean for an Indigenous person who has that profile.

Behrendt here is speaking to evidence of controversy and ambivalence surrounding the idea of an Aboriginal middle class, which includes reluctance to accept the label. In the newspaper article 'Through the class ceiling', Noel Pearson (2007) highlighted the existence of what he termed a 'first generation' Aboriginal middle class. In this piece Pearson portrays the group somewhat

disapprovingly as being disconnected from the majority of the Indigenous population: their 'incomes and lifestyles – and milieu' has created a 'gulf between the Indigenous middle class and the rest of the mob' (see also Foley 2003 in Maddison 2009).

By contrast, Warren Mundine (former National President of the Australian Labor Party) has publicly emphasised the positive importance of an emerging Aboriginal middle class in supporting wider social mobility among Indigenous people, claiming it is hard to 'name a revolution that was started without your middle class' (Maddison 2009: 116). His view parallels those expressed by *The Aboriginal Employment Strategy*, a non-government Aboriginal organisation based in rural New South Wales that focuses on assisting people into work placements. This organisation describes its core goal as 'build[ing] a strong, proud Aboriginal middle class which generates positive peer pressure' (Aboriginal Employment Strategy 2011).

The equivocal character of Indigenous commentary concerning the existence of an Aboriginal middle class was pronounced in a recent article entitled 'Aboriginal middle-class society (Did I hear right?)' in the National Indigenous Times by Aboriginal academic/author Yvette Holt (2011). This featured an extended discussion concerning the possibility of the 'growing phenomenon' of an 'Aboriginal middle-class society' (to which she applies the acronym AMCS). She describes first encountering the phrase at a university retreat attended by Indigenous academics, general staff and administrators, in a guest address concerning Indigenous leadership by human rights and social justice advocate Father Frank Brennan. Holt asks: 'Is this AMCS imaginative or real? And if it is the latter what's it really all about then?' Holt highlights her individual discomfort with such a label, particularly in the sense that it might signify a group that 'inhabits an entire sphere of its own cultural code and conduct'. In a thought provoking section of the article, Holt quotes two colleagues to whom she poses the question: 'what are your thoughts about an Aboriginal middle class society and are you part of it?' It is worth relating both individual's responses in their complete form:

Birra-Gubba male, aged 42—I don't believe my family and I are middle-class, both my wife and I have careers not just jobs, our children attend school, are well educated and we promote education in our household as the vehicle of choice. I would be embarrassed to think of ourselves as Aboriginal middle-class. It is not something we aspire to be, we are just us, and we are comfortable being a family who don't want for anything materially. But that doesn't make us better than or above anybody else. Aboriginality [sic] is who I am and who my children are too. I don't believe that in order for us to advance we need to be further categorised by others.

Kooma female, aged 48—The thought of an Aboriginal middle class society doesn't appeal to me one bit. I come from a family of workers, where we have always worked to provide for our kin and have always looked after one another. It is insulting to think that just because there are Blackfellas who work or own a car or own their own home that people can then feel good and sit back and judge and think: 'oh well, they must be different to the rest of them' or 'they must be middle class'. After all what white people think is their middle class will never be equal to what they believe our middle class will be. I know who I am and I know where I belong. A middle class society is not my idea of success (in Holt 2011).

There is a much of interest in these responses. Firstly, a clear sense that the term 'middle class' can be viewed as strongly pejorative by Aboriginal people, an unwelcome imposed label. But also the suggestion that an Aboriginal 'middle class', if it does exist, may well be different in fundamental respects from its non-Indigenous equivalent. Elsewhere, Paradies (2006: 358–9) has observed that achievement of individual success may threaten the social cohesion of Aboriginal identity, in part by challenging a normative solidarity rooted in a common experience of relative disadvantage, while also raising the danger that this tendency may reinforce wider Australian perceptions of Aboriginal disadvantage as being intractable, and hence not worth addressing; or even more perniciously, blaming Indigenous people themselves. Returning to Holt (2011):

I must say the statement of an Aboriginal middle-class society both awakened and provoked an inwardly somewhat squeamish reaction from within. This growing or should that be glowing reference to Aboriginal Australians having aspired to a hierarchical class-system which sees a percentage albeit a minute percentage of us Blackfellas who are illustratively [sic] rising on par toward our non-indigenous brothers and sisters of middle-classism can feature almost as tokenistic to us as it is palatable to those not subjected to racial marginalisation.

For her part, Behrendt (in Upton 2011) has emphasised the wider 'community obligations' that need to be recognised as incumbent on members of the Aboriginal middle class.

Future directions

A number of key topics for future research arise both from statistical evidence of Aboriginal people in professional occupations (and its limitations), in addition to recent narratives of 'middle classness' (viz. Heiman, Liechty & Freeman 2012) among Aboriginal people themselves, including professionals. In a national context of enduring Indigenous disadvantage, one pressing concern is a need to investigate and identify critical factors that support an

increase in Aboriginal professionals. This should extend also to issues of engagement with chosen professions over time. How long do Aboriginal professionals generally remain in their field and what factors contribute to departure, where this occurs?

Further, given Australian government emphasis on measures to enhance Indigenous social inclusion (Lahn 2012), there is clearly a need to understand the role of occupational aspiration among Indigenous professionals and produce more nuanced accounts of how individual and intergenerational social mobility is envisioned among Aboriginal people. An analytical focus on the cultural dimensions of social mobility will be central to such a research project, as is increasingly being recognised by authors in this field. Scherger and Savage (2010: 406) for example, have highlighted the unresolved theoretical issues that continue to surround 'the role of cultural processes in affecting mobility outcomes'.

It is here that the relevance and significance of perspectives of 'being middle class' within the experience of Aboriginal professionals in urban settings may be found. This includes attitudes to the label 'middle class' variously as a mode of self-description and/or ascription, the implications it carries within narratives of Aboriginal culture and identity and in everyday expressions of Indigenous sociality. From the comments above, it appears evident that maintaining and enacting family and community obligations is critical both for individuals who support the goal of growing an Indigenous middle class and among those who are more sceptical or even critical of the notion. Taking a cue from these remarks, any research agenda that seeks to address Indigenous professionals will require exploration of broader aspects of professional work cultures, including the expectations of community and family (inclusive of wider kin networks), the impact of such expectations on Aboriginal professionals' working lives and the individual strategies used in responding to these.

Description and analysis of the dilemmas, tensions, advantages and rewards of a professional occupation need to be seen as an important aspect of broadening research engagements with Aboriginal people. Exploring the situation of Aboriginal professionals, giving particular attention to the perspectives of those whose lives reflect significant intergenerational socioeconomic transformation, will help foster a more complete picture of contemporary Indigenous life-worlds in Australia.

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